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OLD MEN OR PROGENITORS A PROPOSAL TO EMEND THE TEXT OF DEUTERONOMY 32:7 AND PROVERBS 23:22

Nicholas Wyatt

This brief note is an addendum to a paper recently published in the *Auld Festschrift*¹. In that study, I examined the problem of the interpretation of Deuteronomy 32:8-9. As the outcome of my discussion I proposed the following translation of these verses, in addition to v. 6b, as follows:

- | | | |
|-----|--|---|
| 6b | <i>h^alô³-hû³ 'ābîkâ *qonekâ</i>
<i>hû³ 'ās^akâ way^akôn^anekâ</i> | Is he not your father, your progenitor?
Did he not make you and beget you? |
| ... | ... | |
| 8 | <i>b^ahanḥēl 'elyôn gôyim</i>
<i>b^ahaprîdô b^anê 'ādām</i>
<i>yaššēb g^abulôt 'ammîm</i>
<i>l^amîspar b^anê *'ēl</i> | When The Most High dispersed the nations,
when he scattered the sons of Adam,
he set up the boundaries of the nations
in accordance with the number of the sons of El. |
| 9 | <i>kî ḥēleq yhw^ah 'ammô</i>
<i>ya^aqôb ḥēbel naḥ^alâtô</i> | But the allotment of Yahweh was his kinsman,
Jacob the portion of his inheritance. |

I shall not repeat here the various philological and traditio-historical reasons for this estimate of the text, but refer readers to the original paper.

In the present discussion, I want to look briefly at v. 7, and to suggest that it should be emended slightly, in a way supported by the above interpretation, and at the same time reinforcing the view outlined in the above translation. The MT of v. 7 reads as follows:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <i>z^akôr y^amôt 'ôlām</i>
<i>bînû š^anôt dôr-wādôr</i>
<i>š^a'al 'ābîkâ w^ayaggēd^akā</i>
<i>z^aqēnêkâ w^ayô^am^arû lāk</i> | Remember the days of yore;
consider the years of past generations.
Ask your father, and he will inform you,
your old men, and they will tell you. |
|---|--|

As can be seen, the fourth colon here begins *z^aqēnêkâ w^ayô^am^arû*. This form is suspect on two grounds. Firstly, it introduces an additional entity, the old men of the community, who cannot seriously be taken as the parallel b term to *'ābîkâ* as the a term in the preceding colon. For this to make grammatical or poetic sense, we should expect that the latter would have to be corrected to **'ābōtekâ*, plural “fathers” to match plural “old men”. So some correction or other is inescapable. Even if the shift from singular to plural were allowed on prosodic grounds, we should need to know that the two kinship terms

¹ Wyatt 2006.

had the same reference. We shall see below that they do not. Secondly, the “father” of v. 7 is more likely to be identical with the father of v. 6b than the equivalent of the old men of v. 7. It could of course be argued that in so far as an error has crept into the text, an original or intended **’ābōtekā*, parallel to the *z’qēnēkā* of the following colon, has been attracted into the singular by the singular form of v. 6b. That is certainly one possible solution to the inconsistency, though it leaves unresolved the sense of awkwardness in the introduction of further persons into the context, and is also impossible, given the reference of the father. To offer a solution both to the grammatical inconsistency and to this problem of the number of persons involved, it seems preferable to maintain the singular form of *’ābīkā*, and to offer some correction to the now offending *z’qēnēkā w’yō’m’rū* of MT. Simply to change this to the singular will hardly do, since *’āb*, *zāqēn* do not form a recognizable word-pair, and have only a general semantic overlap, the latter term dealing primarily with authority in the community rather than parentage.

But two simple solutions readily suggest themselves. The first is to see in the original *zayin* of *z’qēnēkā* as now pointed, a misread form of the archaic *ze* (conventionally, with *mater lectionis*, *zeh*, a demonstrative form now recognized, for example in Judges 5:5 and Psalm 68:9 [EVV 8])². This interpretation³ would yield a translation such as:

the one who is your progenitor, and he will tell you.

This suggestion has the advantage of providing an alternative to the awkward *z’qēnēkā* without any consonantal alteration to the word, though the *waw* plural marker still requires deletion from the following verb. However, the oldest form of the consonantal text may well in any case not have had the vowel letter *waw* at the end of the verb, since vowels were originally inferred from the context rather than indicated visually. The consonantal skeleton for the first word, **z qnk* is readily recognizable as relative followed by the participial form with possessive suffix, **qonekā*, already occurring in v. 6b according to my reading⁴, and now preceded by the relative *z*: **ze*. This is strictly comparable in prosodic force to the two biblical passages cited here, which have *yhw’h* *l’lōhīm* || *zeh sinai*, where the second line of the bicolon, with its additional element, provides a ballast variant on the first element (cf. *b* || *bm*, *k* || *km*, *l* || *lm* in Ugaritic⁵).

The second option is to recognize in the original *zayin* of *z’qēnēkā* a scribal error for or misreading of **waw*. In the square script the two consonants, *zayin* and *waw*, are very similar, and readily confused. I propose then, on this hypothesis, an original reading of **w’konekā* **w’yō’m’er* in v.7b, the same argument as used above dealing with the form of the verb. The sense of this emended version would be:

and your progenitor, and he will tell you.

² Cf. HALOT (i) pp. 263-65 (§11), Waltke and O’Connor 1990, p. 337.

³ This suggestion was proposed to me in an oral communication during the writing of this note by Wilfred Watson.

⁴ See Wyatt 2006, for the arguments, syntactical and mythological, for this vocalization of the word. To my understanding for its procreational sense cf. the observations of Sanders 1996, 151 n. 246, endorsing my previous analysis of *kwn* (v. 6b) in Wyatt 1994, p. 414 = 2005, p. 98. He did not note the problem with which the present article deals.

⁵ See examples cited in Tropper 2000, pp. 780-81 (§82.5). On the principle of ballast variant, see Watson 1984, pp. 343-48.

The whole sequence, including 6a because I shall note its significance below, should now be read as follows:

6	<i>h^a-lyhwh tigm^elû-zô^lt</i> <i>‘am nābāl w^elô^l hākām</i> <i>h^alô^l-hû^l ‘ābikā *qonekā</i> <i>hû^l ‘ās^ekā way^ekōn^e nekā</i>	Is this how you repay Yahweh, stupid and unwise people? Is he not your father, your progenitor? Did he not make you and beget you?
7	<i>z^ekōr y^emôt ‘ôlām</i> <i>bînû š^enôt dôr-wādôr</i> <i>š^e‘al ‘ābikā w^eyaggēd^ekā</i> <i>*ze qonekā *w^eyô^lmer lāk</i>	Remember the days of yore; consider the years of generations past. Ask your father, and he will inform you, the one who is your progenitor, and he will tell you.
ENTERR	<i>*w^eqonekā *w^eyô^lmer lāk</i>	and your progenitor, and he will tell you.
OR		
8	<i>b^ehanhēl ‘elyōn gōyim</i> <i>b^ehaprîdô b^enē ‘ādām</i> <i>yaššēb g^ebulôit ‘ammim</i> <i>l^emispar b^enē ‘*zēl</i>	When The Most High dispersed the nations, when he scattered the sons of Adam, he set up the boundaries of the nations in accordance with the number of the sons of El.
9	<i>kî hēleq yhwh ‘ammô</i> <i>Ya^eqōb hēbel nah^alātô</i>	But the allotment of Yahweh was his kinsman, Jacob the portion of his inheritance.

Within this reconstituted sequence, I also suspect that 7a is secondary to the original sequence, an additional rhetorical flourish which breaks the flow of the surrounding material. But this is another issue, not really affecting the much tauter construction of the sequence 6b-9 which is the result of the emendation proposed.

As to the issue of which of the proposals made here is to be preferred, I think that the matter is finely balanced. Perhaps the former of the two shows more finesse, and its archaic style lends something intangible to the overall force of the passage as now to be read. The redundant *waw* on the second proposal also adds a ballast form (“Your father” || “and your progenitor”) which is also prosodically satisfying.

A piece of circumstantial evidence which favours the former option is the reading of Proverbs 23:22⁶, where there is also a potential problem with the text and sense. Following MT, this reads as follows:

<i>š^ema^e l^e ‘ābikā zeh y^elādekā</i>	Obey your father who begot you,
<i>w^e‘al-tābûz kî-zoqnâ ‘immekā</i>	and do not despise your mother because she is old.

It is immediately noticeable that the usage we have proposed above concerning **ze* occurs here in the element *zeh* in the first colon; this corresponds to the usage in Judges 5:5 and Psalm 68:9 (EVV 8), taking it as relative rather than demonstrative. As for the following colon, our suspicion is aroused by the *non-sequitur* in the sequence *y^elādekā* || *kî-zoqnâ*, which hardly enhances the parallelistic balance. Given the possibility we have seen above, it is tempting to see in *kî-zoqnâ* an alteration of an older form which used the radical *√qnh*, and in the *zayin* attached to it the relative particle. But if we were to try to do justice to the mother (the sense that would be something like “who (f.) is your

⁶ My thanks to Wilfred Watson for additionally drawing my attention to this verse.

progenitrix”), a simple revocalization would obviously not be adequate. This solution would require the reconstruction of the feminine relative (*zôl*).

Let me propose a radical reconstruction of the second colon. I suggest that the reference to the mother, *’immekā*, is intrusive, having been suggested to a scribe once an error had occurred in the previous consonantal cluster. This now reads *kzqn* in MT, but should be seen as a corruption of an earlier **zqnk*. This is to be vocalized **ze qonekā*, or **ze qānekā*, the first precisely the form we have discerned in Deuteronomy 32:7 according to the first hypothesis above (and v. 6ba as modified), the second the reading of MT in v. 6ba.

This reading in Proverbs 23:22, together with the omission of the intrusive mother, would yield an altogether more satisfactory prosodic construction:

<i>š’ma’ l’ ’âbîkâ zeh y’lādekâ</i>	Obey your father who begot you,
<i>w’ ’al-îâbûz ze qonekâ</i>	and do not despise the one who is your progenitor.

That is, the referent in each colon is the father. It is tempting to suggest that the mother has been subsequently introduced into the verse by the influence of v. 25 later in the same chapter. It is also worth asking who the father might be in this passage. A natural father, or a divine one? Within the fiction that this is a composition concerned with Solomon, the latter answer is a distinct possibility.

Let us now turn to the identity of the “father” (|| * “[the one who is] your progenitor”) in Deuteronomy 32:7. V. 6a introduces Yahweh, to whom the *h’lô’-hû’* of v. 6b clearly refers. Israel is thus conceptualized as the son of Yahweh, the familiar language used of the king in Israel and Judah (e.g. Psalm 2:7, Hosea 11:1 etc.). This is further reinforced by the description of Jacob as “his kinsman” in v. 9 (*’ammô* || *ya’qôb*). It is surely to this father that the nation is to address its questions concerning its origins in v. 7, without recourse to intermediate witnesses such as previous generations (“ordinary flesh and blood fathers”). So whichever option of the two presented above is chosen, we have a better reading than the “old men” of MT. It is tempting to go further and see in *’am* of v. 6 the “kinsman” of v. 9. But it is preferable to see it echoed rather in the *’ammîm* of v. 8. This latter term applies of course to *Gentile* nations, thus implicitly suggesting, if the echo is rightly discerned, the potential negation of Israel’s filial relationship with Yahweh. This is however reaffirmed in v. 9. As so often when we ask pertinent questions of the Hebrew text, we discern echoes of royal ideology.

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